STEVE CROPPER

Playing His Thang

by Danny McCue

As a producer, session guitarist and songwriting collaborator with the likes of Eddie Floyd, Wilson Pickett and Otis Redding, Steve Cropper helped to shape just about every major recording that was issued by the Stax Recording Company between 1962 and 1971.

Those classic original recordings — many now available again on CDs through both Atlantic and Fantasy Records — are rich in associations, each a legacy of an era when a small "mom and pop" outfit could turn the pop marketplace on its ear. "Dock Of The Bay," "Knock On Wood," "In The Midnight Hour," "Green Onions" — if nothing else, Cropper would deserve immortality for having a hand in the writing of those four songs.

Yet his influence extends far beyond those basics. Over the years Cropper has not only written those hits but produced everyone from Otis Redding to Jeff Beck, Poco to Tower of Power, Jose Feliciano to John Prine, John Cougar to Mitch Ryder. And his memorable, classy guitar work graces literally hundreds of recordings.

Born October 21, 1941 in Willow Springs, Missouri, Cropper spent his early childhood years in the Ozarks, until his family relocated to Memphis when he was nine. He picked up the guitar at 14 while attending Messick High School, where he joined a rock/soul group called the Royal Spades. The band also included bassist Donald Dunn, better known as Duck, saxist Charles "Packy" Axton, whose mother, Estelle, co-ran a small record label called Satellite, a guitarist named Charlie Freeman and Terry Johnson on drums.

Shortly into their "career," the Royal Spades grew into a seven-piece band. Axton, Cropper, Dunn and Jackson remained from the original group. Wayne Jackson played trumpet, Don Nix baritone sax and Jerry Lee "Smoochie" Smith played keyboards. By 1961, having evolved into one of the most popular white R&B groups in Memphis — both musically tight and lively onstage (they patterned their moves after the black groups they idolized) — they changed their name to the Mar-Keys, the name suggested by Estelle Axton.

"Last Night" (Satellite 107) was the Mar-Keys' claim to fame. Produced by Chips Moman, the riff-heavy soul instrumental was the stuff of which frat parties were made. It reached #3 nationally and gave rise to the Stax label — named after co-owners Jim Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton — when a California Satellite label threatened to sue the Memphis company. It also gave Steve Cropper the excuse he needed to leave college and make music his full-time gig.

None of the Mar-Keys' follow-up records did much, and Cropper bowed out while the group was on the road, choosing to return to session work at the Stax studios. There he became an integral part of the house band consisting of keyboardist Booker T. Jones, drummer Al Jackson Jr. and bassist Lewis Steinberg (Dunn was still on the road with the Mar-Keys; after returning to Memphis he occasionally sat in). Cropper played on virtually every side cut at the studio, in addition to helping Stewart with the actual day-to-day operation of the studio.

During one session in the summer of 1962, when an artist scheduled to record failed to show up, the studio players began jamming on a blues riff Cropper and Jones had been fooling with. The riff turned into "Green Onions," another #3 record and one of the most enduring instrumentals of the rock era. The studio group took on a name, Booker T. and the MG's (which stood for Memphis Group), one of the most prolific and influential bands of the 1960s.

The band's trademark sound was a well-played funk riff over which Cropper added his lean rhythm guitar and economic fills, a style flashy in its sparse simplicity. But the MG's' influence was more than purely musical; the very idea of a permanent record company house band that could provide whatever was needed, whenever it was called upon, seeped into the collective consciousness, in the process becoming the prototype for many other loose, hip, versatile studio bands — both the Motown crew and Phil Spector's team of musicians took shape in the wake of the Stax outfit's success.

To say that Booker T. and the MG's were kept busy would be a major understatement. With Stax enjoying distribution by the powerful Atlantic organization, Cropper and his cohorts were called upon to provide the backing not only for the Stax (and Volt, an offshoot label) mainstays but artists on Atlantic proper as well. Cropper not only played his guitar on dozens of recordings by Atlantic and Stax-Volt artists but churned out sides with the MG's too.(In 1964, Dick Dunn replaced Lewis Steinberg in the group.)

And he both wrote and produced at a dizzying pace. In 1963, when an unknown singer named Otis Redding appeared in the studio — as the *driver* of a guitarist friend — Cropper was among the musicians who helped the future superstar lay down his first hit ballad, "These Arms Of Mine." In Peter Guralnick's book *Sweet Soul Music,* Cropper recalled his first impression: "The cat sang about two lines and everybody's eyes just went like this — Jesus Christ, this guy's incredible!" Cropper went on to work closely with Redding throughout his brief career, co-writing his final hit, "(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay" just three days before Redding's untimely death in a plane crash.

In 1965, Atlantic producer Jerry Wexler sent his volatile charge, Wilson Pickett, formerly with the Falcons, down to Memphis to see what Cropper and his team could do. Cropper co-wrote "In The Midnight Hour" with the singer, produced the May 1965 session, and assisted in the creation of another soul music legend.

"Midnight Hour" only reached #21 in *Billboard* but became a standard cover song for rock and soul groups in every corner of the U.S., recorded by, among others, the blue-eyed soul group from New York, the Young Rascals. (Cropper also co-wrote Pickett's "634-5789.") Among Cropper's other writing credits were Eddie Floyd's "Knock On Wood" and the MG's' 1969 hit "Time Is Tight."

Steve Cropper stayed with Stax throughout its heyday. By the end of the '60s, things were winding down — Stax was sold, the MG's disbanded (they re-formed briefly in the early '70s), and Cropper opened up his own recording studio in Memphis. He began producing others outside of the Memphis soul arena, artists as diverse as folk singer John Prine, country-rock group Poco, East Bay funkers Tower Of Power and singer-songwriter Harry Nilsson. He produced the Jeff Beck Group's self-titled 1972 album, Mitch Ryder's *The Detroit-Memphis Experiment* and John Cougar Mellencamp's *Nothing Matters And What If It Did* in 1980.

His guitar can be heard on an amazingly wide array of recordings. Among his session credits: Big Star, Delaney and Bonnie, Roy Buchanan, Yvonne Elliman, Peter Frampton, Lowell Fulson, Richie Furay, Art Garfunkel, Richie Havens, Levon Helm, Chris Hillman, Iron City Houserockers, Etta James, John Lennon (the *Rock 'N' Roll* album), Ramsey Lewis, Manhattan Transfer, Kenny Rankin, Leon Russell, Leo Sayer, Ringo Starr (*Ringo* and *Goodnight Vienna*), Rod Stewart, and many, many others.

In 1971 Cropper released his first solo album, *With A Little Help From My Friends*, on Volt. Just reissued on CD, this was an all-instrumental guitar showcase that still sounds wicked today. That same year saw the release of *Jammed Together*, a collaboration with Albert King and Pop Staples, two artists with whom Cropper had worked at Stax/Volt. Two more solo albums followed in the early '80s, *Playing My Thang* (1980) and *Night After Night*, both on MCA.

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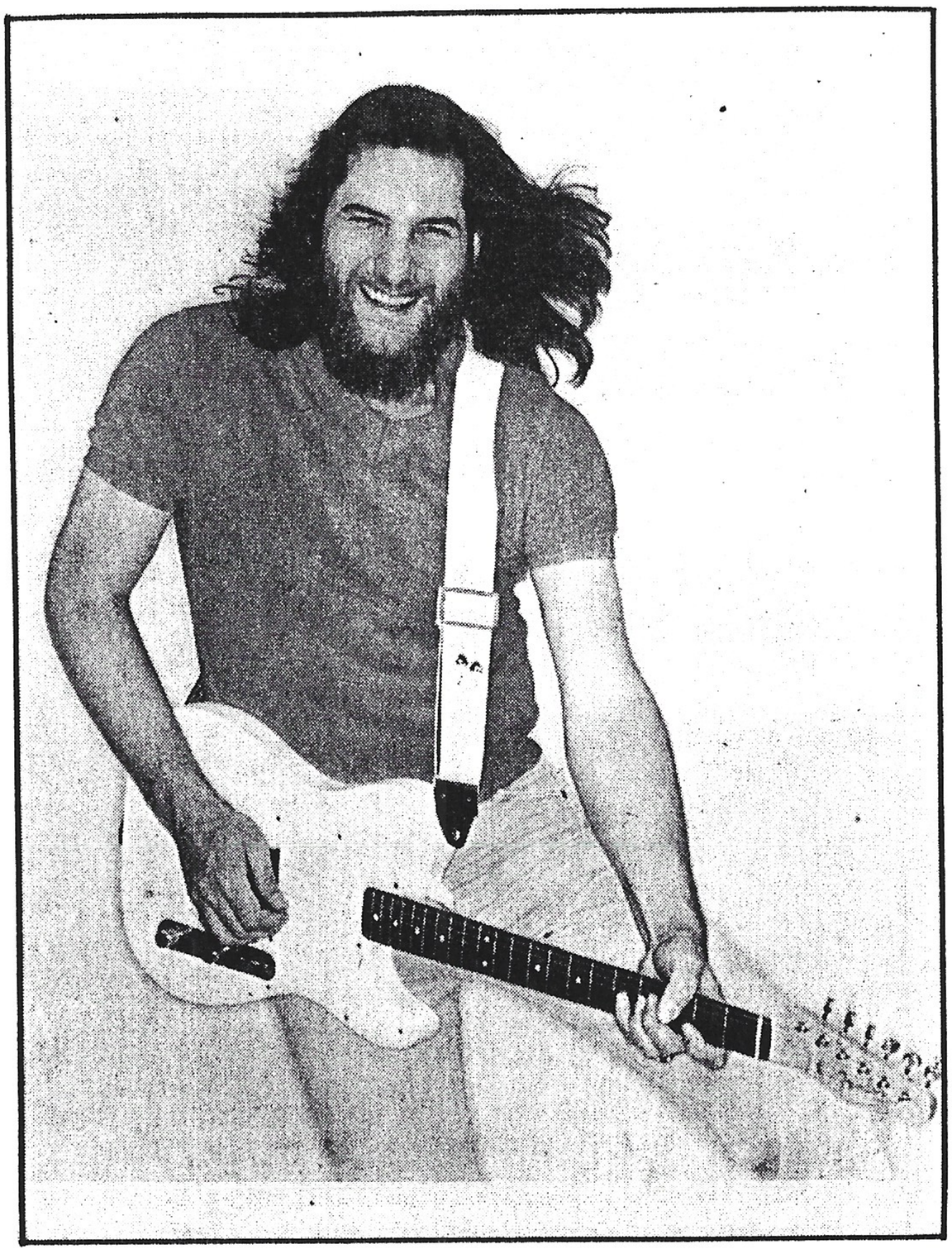

Booker T. and the M.G.'s, L-R; Duck Dunn, Booker T., Al Jackson Jr. and Steve Cropper

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In 1978 Cropper re-entered the spotlight in the most visible manner since his days at Stax when he, along with Duck Dunn, was recruited by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd to provide the core of their Blues Brothers band. Cropper played on all three of their albums and toured with the revue, re-creating the Stax sound for a new generation that had had little or no exposure to that brand of soul.

In more recent years, Cropper — who long ago left Memphis for L.A. — has kept busy doing what he's always done. He performed at New York's Madison Square Garden for Atlantic Records' 40th anniversary bash and last year he, Dunn and Booker T. Jones went out on the road as the MG's for the first time in more than a decade (drummer Al Jackson Jr. has since passed away).

And early this year Cropper toured as a member of Dave Edmunds' All-Star band, backing up Dion, Graham Parker, Kim Wilson (of the Fabulous Thunderbirds) and Edmunds himself. According to many who witnessed the concerts, Cropper stood out among his more well-known peers. His talent has not diminished one iota in the three decades since he was first heard. If anything, his musicianship is finer than ever.

Goldmine: What made you pick up the guitar initially?

Steve Cropper: God, I don't know. Several people have asked me that question and I guess the definitive answer would have to be seeing a guy named Ed Bruce play around Memphis. He was a country 'n' western singer of sorts who had been around Nashville for a long, long time, but by the time I saw him he was doing Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry along with Jimmy Reed like everybody else and it just looked like a fun thing to be doing. One time I actually went backstage after one of his shows and said, "Hey, how do you do that?" and his answer was simple: "You've got to get a guitar and learn how to play it." That was when I was about 14 years old and I began to pursue it from there.

Goldmine: That sounds kind of late to start...

Steve Cropper: It really was. Prior to that — my mother had tried to get me to take piano lessons and so forth, which I was reluctant to do but I had an uncle who would let me take his guitar out of the closet and bang on it a bit. Still, I really didn't know what I was doing.

Most of what I eventually learned came from hanging around with various guys that played, particularly a guy named Charlie Freeman, with whom I started my first band. He was taking lessons and he would pass the things he learned along to me. He was sort of the lead player and I was sort of a rhythm player and so the things he taught me were basically the things that would allow me to accompany him. Charlie was one of the guys that wound up in the Dixie Flyers, which was a Jerry Wexler kind of entourage, several years later.

Goldmine: Did you do a lot of sitting alone in your room playing along with records and that kind of thing?

Steve Cropper: Yeah, but I'll tell you what kind of happened in terms of if there was any development of style or whatever you want to call it. I tried to take lessons, and it didn't take the teacher very long to find out I was just copying him and not really reading the notes on the paper. So he said, "Look, why don't we do it this way? Why don't you bring in some records you like and I'll teach you to play them?" And that's the way I did it.

Goldmine: What were some of those records?

Steve Cropper: I think there was one called "Walk Don't Run," which I liked and — like a lot of other guitar players around Memphis at the time — the first song you learned was "Honky Tonk" by Bill Doggett. Once you had that down... of course most of the guys learned it in the key of E, but it was really in F; it required a capo to play or a very good guitar player who could play it while barring the first fret. That's sort of how that all went.

Goldmine: How did you know you were ready to start playing in bands?

Steve Cropper: I just knew it, I don't know how exactly, but it's kind of funny how we got into it. Charlie and I went in to audition for a spot on these sock hops that a popular local DJ was running. And what happened was, we went up to the radio station to audition one night, just the two of us — we were doing some Jimmy Reed and some Elvis, I don't even remember exactly what songs they were. But anyway, unknown to us, he had flipped the mic on and was putting us out over the air. All of a sudden the phones lit up and the people are going, "Who are these guys? They're pretty good." So that's when we kind of knew we were on the right track and he told us to get a drummer and he'd put us on the hop, which meant we spent the next week or so in a frantic search for a drummer. We finally found one named Terry Johnson, who was in the ninth grade; he was the only guy in the school who knew anything about drums so he was the guy we went with and the thing just mushroomed from there. The next thing y'know, there were guys trying to get into the band. Duck Dunn was one of them.

Goldmine: What was your parents' reaction to all this?

Steve Cropper: The good thing is, they didn't stand in my way. They had their doubts: at first they wouldn't buy me an electric guitar and I had to work enough to save up the money to buy my own. But once I did that and my father saw how serious I was he said, "You learn to play that one and I'll get you a good one." He kept his promise.

Goldmine: What guitar did he buy you?

Steve Cropper: It was a Gibson. I don't even remember the number on it, but it was an arch-top semi-acoustic.

Goldmine: What made you eventually switch to Fenders?

Steve Cropper: I think probably the influence of Charlie Freeman, because I played Gibsons for awhile and Charlie's parents bought him a Telecaster and it just had a different ring to it, a little bit better bite, not quite as jazzy, but I went through quite a few Gibsons before I switched: Birdlands, ES-335's, Firebirds. I had them all and then once I finally switched to the Telecaster, it just seemed to be the instrument I was meant to play. Every time I would try another guitar in the studio I'd instantly have one of the guys saying, "Cropper, put that thing in the case and get the Telly out." So I didn't really have a choice; everybody seemed to prefer the Telecaster to everything else I've played.

Goldmine: Do you think you have a trademark style or signature riff?

Steve Cropper: I don't know. I think I'm probably identified as a player because of all the records I've played on, but I don't know. I'm accused of having a certain style, basically because of the simplicity and the fact that I leave a lot of holes and stuff. I make room for singers, somehow, and musicians sort of think that's a unique thing to do.

A lot of guys get on a session and they want to play every note they've ever learned (laughs), while in the back of their minds they still want to be good session players — you're not a good session player playing every note you've ever learned. You have to learn when to play and when not to play. I think that one of the golden rules of being a good session player is, it's not what you play, but what you don't play that counts. Learning to leave the secret holes.

Goldmine: When you walk into a session, do you find yourself having to adapt to the rest of the band, or to the singer?

Steve Cropper: I think it's more adapting to the singer. It's not that I play particularly different, one singer to the other, but I definitely try to mold myself to the surroundings, to what's going on. On a country session, obviously I play a little country; on a jazz session, I'll play more jazz. You just sort of adapt, somewhat, to the singer, but in terms of playing behind Otis Redding or playing behind Rod Stewart, I play basically a little of the same licks.

Goldmine: I know at Stax there were a lot of different groups of songwriters. Did you find that certain writers made you modify your style as a guitarist?

Steve Cropper: Yeah, there were a lot of different writers, and I think I would have to say that in certain instances I was a little bit limited because I didn't start doing sessions completely knowing how to play the guitar. I learned on the job and I had enough chops to keep me going; everybody seemed to like it. I was in demand all over town, as was Duck Dunn and a lot of the other players, until we got so busy at Stax that we just turned into the band that worked there exclusively.

There were writers who came through there that had certain specifics as to what they wanted, but they usually walked away fairly satisfied. I mean, when you get someone like Booker T., who was so forceful, it was just incredible, he could do anything. Whatever it was, whatever it took, it still came out the Stax sound.

Goldmine: Was there ever any exchange of information between the guys at your studio and the guys at Motown?

Steve Cropper: In a way, but never as a direct exchange of information. A lot of people mention us in the same breath, but we just happened to both be happening at the same time. They did their thing and we did our thing. I think that among the writers there was a little bit of a rivalry going on to see who could get the next dance song and there's no getting around it, we were a gung-ho operation. We wanted to be on top and out of that came some fantastic artists: Carla Thomas, Otis Redding...

Goldmine: What was the physical set-up of the studio like?

Steve Cropper: If you can visualize a movie theater that had two aisles and you pulled all the seats out, you'd have a pretty good idea of what the actual space was. Then you cut it into thirds by drawing a line down the middle, about two-thirds of the way down. You use the third that's on the left for storage and in the right third you put carpeting and you put up a wall and a big curtain to separate the space and that became the studio, more or less. I think the measurements of the space were 17 by 23 or 24 feet and two-thirds of the stage that faced this space was used as the control room. The old movie theater speakers were used as our playback monitors. The other third was used as the Satellite record store.

In the actual room itself, about 15 feet into it, there was a piano, and then behind that was a drum riser; on the other side is where Duck and I would be located and y'know, the funny thing was the placement of the microphones. On the old Stax records, on some of the first ones to come out in stereo the left mix was on one side and the right was on the other. Nothing was in the center and all of the echo was coming back on one side and the vocalist was coming out. Well, suffice to say that it was a very strange set-up. We really didn't deal with it until about 1965.

Goldmine: Are you one of those people who say that monaural sound was better?

Steve Cropper: No (laughs). No way. I love dynamics and I love being able to hear the full range of sound. I don't hate monaural sound — a lot of those earlier records, I mean the groups were fantastic, you can't top them, but you can't get around the fact that they were limited to a degree by the technology that we had available. If

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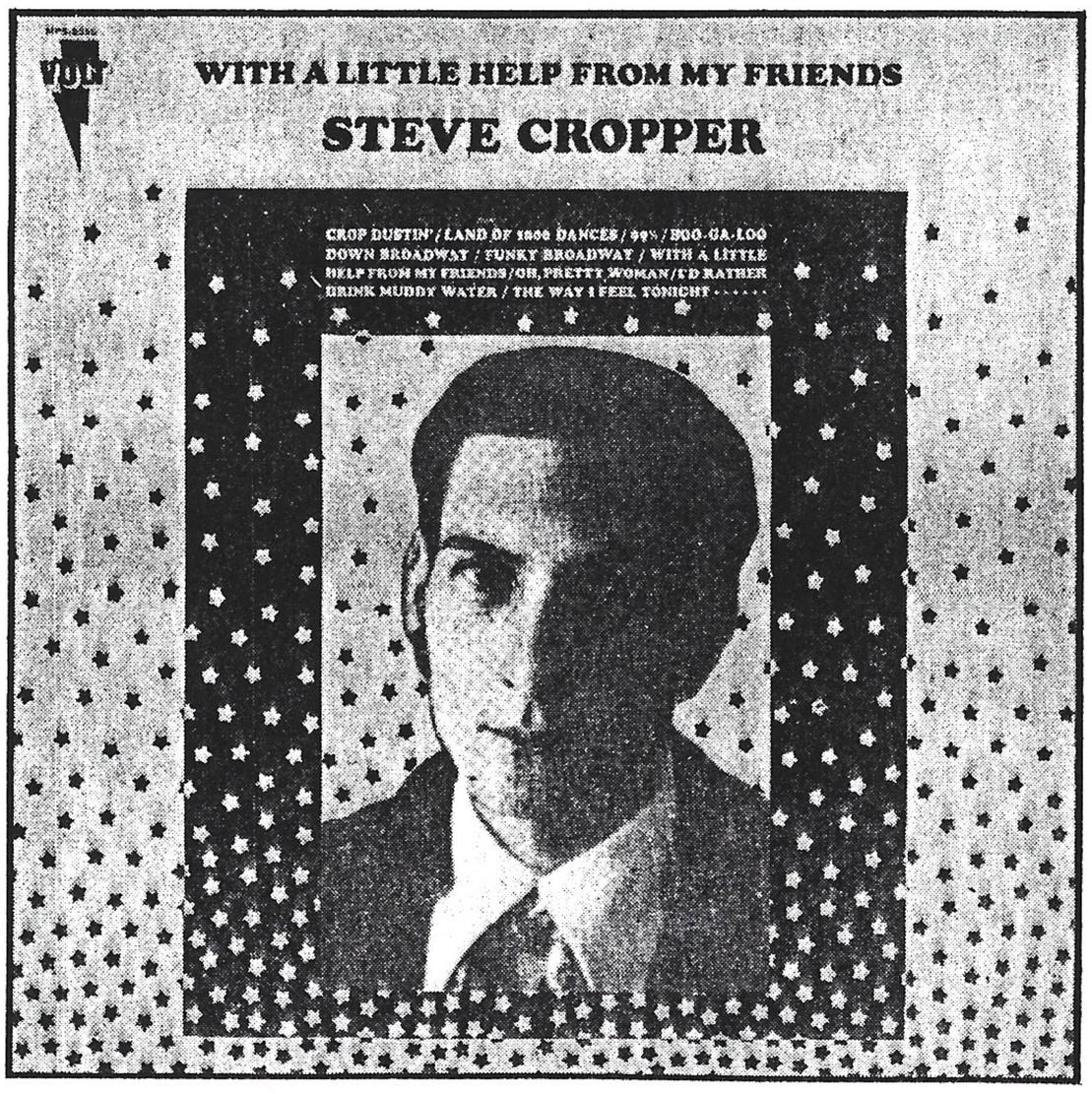
WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS
STEVE CROPPER
CROP DUSTIN' / LAND OF 1000 DANCES / 99½ / BOO-GA-LOO
DOWN BROADWAY / FUNKY BROADWAY / WITH A LITTLE
HELP FROM MY FRIENDS / OH, PRETTY WOMAN / I'D RATHER
DRINK MUDDY WATER / THE WAY I FEEL TONIGHT

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we could get those same guys back with us in a really good technical studio, there's no telling what we'd be able to do.

Another thing is, I think some of the rawness and some of the simplicity was camouflaged and covered up because of the limitations of recording in mono. What you got out of it was the lead singer, with his lyrics and his half of the performance and you got the band and you heard that performance and every now and then you could hear a stand-out lick; in other words, there was this big 60-cycle vocal on the bottom and everything else was sort of crowded at the top, sort of like having a stew and looking for where the meat is.

While we're talking about the actual Stax sound, I think that you've got to credit the whole thing to Al Jackson. He was probably the finest drummer for a session that I have ever worked with and the only other drummers that I think were good enough were the ones who would walk in and say, "My favorite drummer was Al Jackson, I loved him." Those are the drummers that would sit down and play the drums like they were supposed to be played.

Goldmine: Why do you rate him so high?

Steve Cropper: He just had a feel like nobody else I've ever seen. A definite artist within himself, he was the driving nucleus of that whole thing and he knew dance tempos, he knew groove, he could listen to a piece of music and go, "It needs this." I mean, a song could be written one way and within 15 minutes he'd have it completely turned around in another direction and he'd be right, that's just the way he was.

Goldmine: Do you think that over the years you developed that knack?

Steve Cropper: I hope I did. After being exposed to something for so long you sort of pick up certain habits and a lot of times I think those habits actually allowed us to save some people's songs. Songwriters would come in with a definite idea of how they wanted a particular song and we could begin to work it with their intentions in mind. Nobody was ever denied their creative input; it would be like, "Okay, what have you got?" "Here it is." "Okay, here are the changes." And we would beat it to death until we finally said, "Guys, give us five minutes."

So we'd sit down, Al and I, sometimes some of the other guys, and say, "Okay, where are we going with this thing?" We'd sit there and start a groove going and then when we were ready we'd call the guys back in and we'd say, "Okay, let's try this." And it usually happened pretty quickly after that.

We did that a lot. I would say that 90 percent of the hits were all "head" arranged. There were no charts, nobody had everything written out. Otis always came in with horn ideas, and I think that rubbed off on me too. I got to where I would write a song and the same night I'd be coming up with horn ideas. Maybe not million-dollar riffs, but something that the guys could take from there.

Goldmine: I recently read an article about the Motown session guys and the article said they had as many as three three-hour sessions a day and produced a song an hour. How does that compare with the way things went at Stax?

Steve Cropper: Well, not to try and top it or anything, but we would usually write three songs a night and record three hits the next day (laughs). Whenever we really got on a roll, Isaac Hayes and David Porter would work all week on songs for whatever artist was coming in, then they would rehearse the artist for a couple of days while we were cutting somebody else. And a lot of times it hurt us because we couldn't get Isaac on the session we were working on, but that's about how it went for much of the late '60s.

Goldmine: Tell us about some of your collaborations, for example, with Otis Redding?

Steve Cropper: Otis always came in with ideas and we'd sit down and start to jam; I'd play him things I was working on and he'd play me some of his ideas and we'd use whatever fit.

Goldmine: I recently saw a photo of Otis playing you a song he had written in the studio, and I found the image of him with a guitar in his hands very striking.

Steve Cropper: Oh, he was always doing that. I've got pictures of when we were on tour in Europe and he always had a guitar in his hand; I mean he never stopped. He'd get on the bus and the guitar would come out; if we were on the bus for six hours, he would play for six hours. Y'know, he plays the guitar on "Sweet Soul Music," the Arthur Conley record. He produced it and is playing guitar on it. He also played his guitar on "Dock Of The Bay."

Goldmine: Are there any performers you wished you worked with but just never got the opportunity to do so?

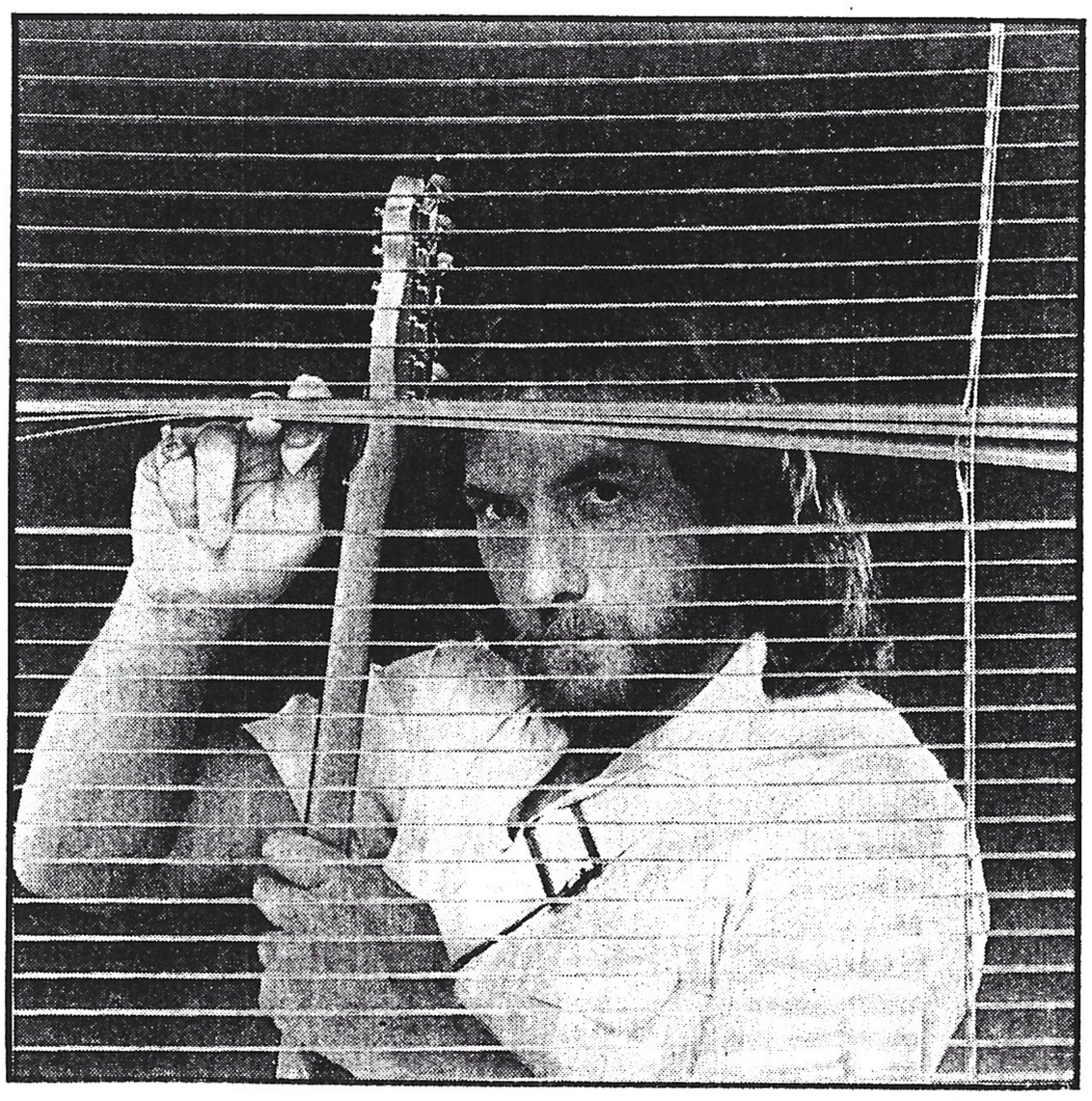
Steve Cropper: Probably Aretha Franklin's at the top of the list. Tina Turner. It's a hard thing to say. I was on a session one time and Stevie Wonder was recording "Superstition" in the same building; he's a genius and I'd love to work with him. Marvin Gaye would've been heaven to work with. I mean, I had so many great ones, I don't feel left out; I've worked with Tom Dowd and people like Rod Stewart, Richard Perry, Otis Redding, who was probably, as far as I'm concerned, the greatest singer who ever lived. And I worked with people like Eddie Floyd, Carla Thomas, Sam and Dave, Johnnie Taylor... some of the best, so I've had a lot of fun at it.

Goldmine: Do you have, say, one particularly vivid recollection from your days as a session man at Stax?

Steve Cropper: There's one I've talked about before that you can use if you like. It occurred at a Wilson Pickett session. Eddie Floyd and I had been trying to write something for him and we were goofing around with the idea of using a telephone number as the title of a song when we came up with "634-5789" and we were really proud of it.

So the next day I go over to the airport and pick up Wilson and say, "Look, before I check you into the hotel, why don't we go by the studio? We've got this hot song that we wrote for you last night that I'd like you to hear right away." So we get to the studio, go into the control room with Eddie Floyd, cue up the tape and I hand Wilson Pickett a sheet with the lyrics on it and he gets about half a verse into it when he wads the paper up and throws it on the floor. He says, "This is the biggest piece of shit I've ever seen." About this time I see Eddie Floyd fly across me and tackle Wilson and the next thing I know, they're rolling on the control room floor and I'm thinking, these guys are going to kill each other. I mean, I just knew I was in trouble, I had never seen aything like this in my life — I've been in a few bar brawls, but this was crazy.

I later found out that they had been in a band together and this was a fairly regular occurence. Anyway, we finally get them apart and I said, "Forget this!" And we all left. About six o'clock that night I called Wilson at the hotel to see if he was alright and he asked if we were going to write that night. I said, "I don't know, it depends on how you feel." He says, "Is Floyd around?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, bring him along." Now, as I'm pulling into the hotel parking lot I see this sign for Coca-Cola or something like that and it says, 99½ percent real something or other and I think, ah, now there's a good idea. So that night we wrote "99½ Of Your Love Won't Do" and the next day we cut both that and "634-5789," just like nothing had ever happened the day before and they were both big hits for him.

Goldmine: I bet you get people coming up to you all the time, when you go on a session, saying, "Wow, Steve Cropper, Stax Records."

Steve Cropper: Yeah, but I mean (laughs), if I took any of that to heart, I'd probably go crazy. Sure, I get that a lot, people putting me somewhere other than where I am. I mean, I've had some accomplishments. I've done fairly well, but, y'know, I don't think about it. Y'know, it's every time you pick up a rock 'n' roll book or something like that, there's your name, and you get friends who say, "I was looking at an album and there your name was on it." I go through that on a day-to-day basis, but you just have to sort of hear it and let it go in one ear and out the other. You can't get caught up in it, because I think if you did, you'd be useless.